Nick Zegarac's

# THE Hollywood ART



## Louis B. Mayer

# HOLLYWOOD'S RAJA

# MEN OF VISION: LOUIS B. MAYER AND THE DREAM FACTORY THAT WAS








*"He was the most honest man I ever met in Hollywood. L.B. had a sense of romance about the movie business…he was really an entrepreneur in the old-fashioned sense…He believed. He adored the business and he understood it."*

– **Katharine Hepburn**

In the roughly 54 years since his death, movie mogul Louis B. Mayer has been described as everything from a benevolent father figure to a *"courtly polished villain"*. Whatever the public's perception of this great man today Mayer's legacy has endured as a formidable star maker and purveyor of some of the grandest motion pictures that Hollywood has ever produced.

*"He was truly a great administrator,"* said agent/producer Charles Feldman, *"…if they had more men in the business with the sort of imagination and daring that Mayer had in the years of his prime, the business would not be wallowing in the slough of despond that it's in today."*

Perhaps. But Mayer's sense of what made good movies seemed woefully out of touch even by 1950, the last full year of his reign as MGM's undisputed monarch. That in the post-war years L.B. would see his supremacy in the picture business topple at the behest of lesser men (Dore Schary and Nick Schenck) who misperceived their own stepping into the light at Mayer's expense, but quickly discovered they could only tread as paltry substitutes in his shadow, speaks not only to Mayer's preeminence as a 'great administrator' but also as one of those truly gifted archetypes of the movie mogul – a extinct breed in Hollywood today, replaced by the bean counter and corporate 'yes' man.

During his reign at MGM, Mayer's policy for building the studio to prominence was simple: hire good people and leave them alone. He trusted and admired creative individuals for the areas in expertise that he admittedly lacked. *"Mayer's great faculty was the wooing of stars,"* said director King Vidor, *"The perpetuation of the star system."*

Top: L.B. Mayer with producer Joe Pasternak discuss shooting on the set of Two Sisters from Boston (1946). Middle: The Irving G. Thalberg Building, built in the Moderne style and completed in 1938, housing MGM's creative staff and executive body. Bottom: MGM's original production facilities circa 1928 - just before the dawning of sound technologies.





















(CENTRE: L.B. Mayer seated at his imposing oval deco desk inside the Thalberg building circa 1938. Mayer vacillated in the art of intimidation, though rarely in a mean spirited way and always with a purpose. For example; when Jeanette MacDonald seemed uninspired in her recordings of songs for the film Maytime, Mayer summoned her to his office whereupon he dropped to his knees, tears streaming down his cheeks, to belt out  a Jewish hymn (quite badly) to show Ms. MacDonald the passion she should have for her vocals.

L.B.'s real birthday remains a mystery. After becoming an American citizen he adopted July 4th as his 'official' birthday. Each year the staff would be assembled on the 4th by studio decree to extend their felicitations and Mayer - given to being a ham - frequently fainted from faux gratitude over that public display of enforced affection. Mayer thought of MGM as a family. While some of his stars, like Jane Powell, Debbie Reynolds and June Allyson adored Mayer with a reverence they might have displayed for their own fathers, other stars like Elizabeth Taylor and Gene Kelly were forthright in their animosities. Creative differences aside, Mayer was hardly an angel - but if he had his faults publicly he could always back them up privately with sound logic.

LEFT TOP: Mayer poses with theatre magnet Marcus Loew (centre) and director Fred Niblo who directed 1929's Ben-Hur. Most people think that MGM put Loew's Theatre Group on the map but actually it was the other way around, with Loewe creating MGM out of the amalgam of Metro Pictures, Goldwyn Pictures and Louis B. Mayer Productions. With Marcus Loew's premature death in 1927, Mayer lost the first of his sounding boards in the industry; someone he could turn to when the chips were down.

LEFT MIDDLE & BOTTOM LEFT AND RIGHT: views of Culver City. From the air, MGM was an impressive complex of buildings whose status in the industry grew exponentially the closer one approached. MGM's iconic tower sign was dismantled in 1980 and replaced by a Lorimar Telepictures logo that eventually gave way to a Columbia Studios logo. At the height of its operations, MGM sported the biggest and best sound stages in all of Hollywood, the biggest commissary and a state of the art film processing lab.

RIGHT: Technicians prepare to record Leo the First's roar for the MGM logo. There have been seven Leo's who have roared for MGM over the years. MGM's original main gate circa 1923 was done in the Roman style but eventually gave way to more smooth deco lines and a grander promenade opening onto the Thalberg Building.



True - and every star was equal in L.B.'s eyes. When new contract player, Lena Horne was told that the commissary was closed to 'her kind', Mayer invited Horne and the entire cast of Cabin in the Sky (1943) to sup with him in his private dining room for the afternoon, then issued a direct memo to all studio departments that read, 'All colored performers and other employees at MGM will, in future, have the same access as white performers and employees to all facilities of this studio!' As if to back this claim through external deeds, Mayer further courted the acceptance of Walter White, president of the NAACP, proclaiming that *"I live and breathe the air of freedom and I want it for others as well as myself!"*



In hindsight, L.B.'s personal reflections after being deposed from MGM in 1951 were cluttered with residual resentment toward Dore Schary and Nick Schenck – the two men directly responsible for his removal - and a growing bitterness that eventually consumed his every thought, though his words have also accurately foreshadowed the mire of making movies today. Offering his opinion on the business in 1955, the impassioned Mayer publicly fretted that *"We have so few real stars today. The glamour's gone out of the business. Imagine public idols, gods, washing dishes, wearing blue jeans, going to psychiatrists. How can anyone idolize people like that?"*

Indeed, by 1960 L.B.'s dream factory was in a bad way. The appointment of Dore Schary by Loewe's chairman Nicholas Schenck, as V.P. in Charge of Production almost a full decade after Thalberg's death had been an ill fit for the studio from the start. Schary and MGM were not only strange, but highly incompatible bedfellows. Schary was an ambitious writer/producer and an intellectual, *"...so constipated with his own importance that his smallest pronouncement sounds like the Pitt of the Elder"* (S.J. Perelman).



He was a man who reveled in what is commonly referred to today as 'message pictures' – movies with parables to tell. His artistic sensibilities clashed with MGM's old world glamour and more importantly with L.B.'s idea of what stars should be. *"Louis B. Mayer made more stars than all the rest of the producers in Hollywood put together,"* defends director and Mayer loyalist, Clarence Brown, *"He knew how to handle talent; he knew that to be successful, he had to have the most successful people in the business working for him. He was like Hearst in the newspaper business…he made an empire out of the thing."*










# MAYER VS. SCHARY

*"If seriously challenged L.B. would maul you to death.
Nick (Schenck) would do you in with a cyanide cocktail."*

– Dore Schary

To understand L.B. Mayer's resentment toward Dore Schary is to first admittedly reflect briefly on the man who would eventually come to be his quiet nemesis and successor. Born in 1905, Schary was an MGM alumni thrice removed from power by producer Harry Rapf before being appointed by Nick Schenck to oversee daily production. In his early years at the studio, Schary had been a successful screenwriter, but had also managed to acquire the patina of being a devious backstabber – thanks in part to an incident where he attempted to pass off Irving Brecher's screenplay for the Marx Bros. Go West (1940) as his own work.

Despite his reputation, or perhaps in spite of it, Schary was a rising star at MGM who had managed a modestly impressive slate of projects under Rapf's supervision; including Lassie Come Home, Journey For Margaret and Bataan. However, when Mayer elected to cancel two of Schary's more weighty projects, Schary chose to skulk off to David O. Selznick, then RKO rather than work within Mayer's framework.

(Previous page. TOP: Mayer and visiting dignitaries in Italy as director Fred Niblo (left) prepares to shoot 1929's Ben-Hur epic sea battle. Shooting delays and an accidental fire on one of the galleys that forced the film's extras to dive into the sea convinced Mayer that from that point on MGM movies should all be shot on the back lot rather than location.

MIDDLE: Irving Grant Thalberg, nicknamed MGM's wunderkind because he had an impeccable knack of knowing what the public wanted to see. Mayer and Thalberg began their association as friends. But Thalberg's desire to make fewer, but grander pictures, clashed with Mayer's assembly line mentality. At its zenith, MGM made 52 pictures a year - or one per week - an unheard of, and, unmatched feat in Hollywood's history.

BOTTOM: MGM's vast 'Prop Department' was the envy of the other major studios, consisting of costumes, furniture and accessories from virtually every period in history.

This page. TOP: Dore Schary, who came to MGM in 1949 with Mayer's reluctant blessing only to oust Mayer from his position a scant two years later. Schary's penchant for low budget thrillers had been well honed at RKO - the studio he hailed from - but in retrospect it severely clashed with the studio's ensconced desire to produce lavish spectacles and grand Technicolor musicals.

Middle: Schary and Mayer smile winningly for the cameras with Jane Powell on the set of Royal Wedding. Only Powell seems to sense the backstage friction that would soon topple this empire.

Bottom: MGM marks its 30th year in movies with a cake cutting ceremony presided over by Schary (right).



Though Schary's initial exchanges with Mayer after his appointment as V.P. at the studio had been cordial – even respectful – slowly a quiet crisis between the old and new regimes on the back lot increasingly generated friction in business acumens as well as personal tastes. Mayer had two edicts by which he oversaw daily production: 'do it big' and 'give it class.' Schary was inevitably more cerebral, some would suggest highfaluting: teach your audience something. Hence, the mounting tensions between Schary and Mayer were both a contradiction of styles and a clash of wills.

To be certain, L.B. could harbor a grudge. He also preferred things be done his own way – not an outrageous request considering that after Thalberg's death the sole responsibility of daily operations had been placed squarely on his shoulders with much trepidation but with regular success.

Mayer intuitively understood the artistic, as well as the business end of making movies. His shift away from more 'adult' movies into 'family entertainment' bode well with the wholesome appeal for 'clean entertainment' during the war years. He would be less successful and popular with the post-war generation.



Worse, the creative landscape of Hollywood that surrounded L.B., the Hollywood that Mayer half-heartedly and unsuccessfully attempted to reenter a half dozen times as 'star maker' after his ousting from the studio, had so drastically changed with the onslaught of television that it must have seemed a remote and foreign enterprise to this man who once was regarded as at the forefront of his craft.



TOP: A relationship that deserves quantifying. One of MGM's greatest - if not 'the' greatest assets was Judy Garland (seen here with Mayer and composer Irving Berlin rehearsing the score to the film Easter Parade (1945). Much has been made of Mayer's so called 'abuse' of this mega watt talent; his complicity in allowing Judy's stage mom to exploit her child with little to no time off between movies, as well as Mayer's 'sanctioning' of prescription weight loss drugs and sleeping pills to keep Judy working and thin. But one cannot underestimate the naiveté that permeated Hollywood's recreational use of drugs in the 1920s, 30s and 40s. Without full disclosure of the addictive nature of such drugs, stars frequently resorted to various uppers and downers to keep their spirits up while working at breakneck speed for all the studios.

MIDDLE: Mayer observes as Garland cuts her wedding cake with groom - director Vincente Minnelli: Judy's second husband. Her first, band leader David Rose, proved a volatile relationship, expedited to a successful divorce by Mayer's P.R. which also kept Garland's miscarriage a secret from the press.

BOTTOM: Mayer enjoys a turkey dinner on the set of Love Finds Andy Hardy (1939) with Mickey Rooney and the cast. Co-star Lewis Stone serves as carver as Faye Holden (left), Evelyn Keyes (right) and Cecilia Parker look on.





ABOVE: in the 1940s Mayer reigned supreme over a roster of talent unrivaled in Hollywood either during his own time or afterward. For MGM's 20th anniversary Mayer posed for this Life Magazine photo with his most prominent players. Throughout the 1930s and 40s MGM acquired talent like most people do paper clips - by the handful - thanks to an ever streaming line of talent scouts circling the globe on the studio's behalf in search of that next 'great' discovery. Mayer's great faculty was the wooing of stars, the creation and maintenance of a star system. Some of the most interesting faces absent from this assemblage are Judy Garland, Clark Gable and Norma Shearer - all three considered titans of the first quality under MGM's banner. The names remaining are distinguished and many. How many can you identify?

LEFT: the Mayers and the Selznicks. L.B. with first wife, Margaret, attends the wedding of his daughter Irene to independent film producer, David O. Selznick. The inside joke at the studio immediately following the reception was that “the son-in-law also rises.” Selznick’s tenure at MGM as a producer was short-lived, moreover due to Selznick’s impatience and need to control every aspect of the film-making process.

BELOW: a youthful and invigorated Mayer and Thalberg horse around on the golf course over choosing the right club – circa 1930. If there was ever a doubt as to how much like father and son these two had once been, this image puts to rest the rumors that Mayer ‘always’ despised the wunderkind he had initially helped to promote.



Perhaps one of the greatest misperceptions about L.B. Mayer was that he was a very fortunate tyrant – an uncouth and uneducated dictator who made and ruined talent to suit his own changeable whims.

On the contrary, upon discovering a talent – any talent - Mayer would do everything in his power to expose and nurture it – cultivate it through acting, dancing and singing lessons, instructing his writers, directors and producers to craft tailor-made product for it

and ever fine-tuning finished films to ensure that every star shone brighter than most others in the cinema firmament.

Nothing was too good for Mayer's protégés. Though not initially one of his favorites, Judy Garland was quickly embraced and even coddled by Mayer's patience and respect, primarily after L.B. heard her sing 'Dear Mr. Gable'. Mayer could certainly recognize a talent and with Garland he did not have to look hard or long. Today, Mayer's sanctioning of prescription sedatives to help Garland quell the emotional fragility that plagued the latter half of her life has been misinterpreted as Mayer's acting as Judy's drug dealer – a sort of manipulative rouse by the mogul to get his actress hooked on pills that could be used to bend her will and make her a more manageable commodity for the studio to exploit.

In fact, Mayer was only making available to Garland whatever medicinal cures existed in a concerted attempt to straighten out her erratic behavior. Since Mayer knew nothing of mental illness or even that prolonged exposure to such sedatives leads to addiction, it seems highly unlikely in retrospect that his intensions toward Garland were laced with anything but the milk of human kindness. To be certain, Mayer wanted Garland back on the job – but not unhealthy or uncontrollable, to hold up the company with countless costly delays.

For Mayer, Judy was necessary to MGM's musical success – ergo, she needed to be cured. That no cure proved instant or lasting was a tragedy and likely not one that Mayer would have wished on one of his most popular stars. Mario Lanza – whose ego alone could have occupied two floors of the Thalberg Memorial Building also could do no wrong as far as Mayer was concerned. Mayer's grandson Gerald would later admit *"I think there's a misapprehension that he (Mayer) was lucky. Most men won't hire people who can replace them, but he hired Thalberg and Cedric Gibbons and a lot of others…He had a kind of genius."*







RIGHT: Mayer with actress Norma Shearer and producer Irving Thalberg shortly after the former became Mrs. Thalberg. Irving's careful guidance of Shearer's career was the subject of gossip about nepotism but Norma proved she had what it took to be a great leading lady. After Thalberg's death, Shearer quickly learned that Mayer did not hold the same interest in retaining her services at the studio. In fact, upon Thalberg's death, Mayer resisted paying out the sum of shares owed Norma as Thalberg's wife. Eventually, Shearer chose to retire from the screen rather than fight the battle at the studio. She would marry Sun Valley ski instructor Martin Arrouge five years after Thalberg's untimely death.

MIDDLE: Happier times. Norma's wedding portrait to Thalberg with Irene and L.B. immediately to Thalberg's right. Guests of prominence include director King Vidor (far right) and actress Marion Davies (to Norma's left) who was then the mistress of publishing mogul, William Randolph Hearst.

BOTTOM: Selznick delights in Mayer signing over Clark Gable's services for his production of Gone With The Wind (1939). In private, Selznick had to practically beg Mayer for Gable - a bitter pill for Selznick to swallow - while Gable outwardly made it known that he wanted no part of the film. It didn't matter, Gable was going to play Rhett Butler because that's the way Mayer wanted it. In return, Selznick had to practically sign away his distribution rights to the film that would forever become synonymous with his name.







That genius would be tested immediately following the untimely death of MGM's V.P. in Charge of Production Irving Thalberg in 1936. The relationship between Mayer and Thalberg, as all relationships between Mayer and fellow colleagues who were at least on equal creative and/or business plains, had been periodically strained. Following Thalberg's demise, it had been quietly rumored around town that MGM's supremacy in the industry would soon be in jeopardy. Instead, Mayer took control as few of his peers expected, ushering in the golden age of musicals under Arthur Freed while developing and maintaining complete and absolute control over all daily operations.

*"L.B. wasn't crude at all,"* Esther Williams would later reflect, *"Super-intelligent people might have found him common or crass, but he was trying to be the kind of executive that Lew Stone or Walter Pidgeon would play. He may have been an immigrant with a good suit of clothes, but never forget that this was a man working hard to be an American!"*

At the dawn of her MGM tenure, Williams had been one of Mayer's reluctant discoveries. Although Mayer's initial response to signing this champion swimmer had been *"How the hell do you make movies in a swimming pool?"* a quiet and mutual respect developed between mogul and future star almost from the moment the ink on her contract had dried. Williams no nonsense approach to celebrity garnered L.B.'s admiration.

Reportedly, after their first and only disagreement, Williams quietly let L.B. rant for a few moments before informing him that he should not raise his voice to her again. When asked by a perplexed Mayer why this was so, Williams calmly added, *"Because you can't get to the other end of the pool."* Mayer considered that he was not a great or even a good swimmer. *"They'd say swimmer take your mark,"* Williams went on, *"I'd go to the other end and you'd go right to the bottom."* Agreed. It was a tete a tete between equals. Mayer had his strengths. Williams had hers.

(LEFT: Throughout his life, Mayer tried to justify his pious outward belief in the sanctity of marriage with his own sexual desires that often led him into strange and complicated relationships with other women. Mayer is seen at a post Oscar gala with one of his stars, Jean Harlow. The two were never intimate, perhaps because Jean was a true innocent in every sense of the word who would eventually marry MGM producer Paul Bern instead. MIDDLE: Thalberg gleefully signs his contract under Mayer's watchful eye. BOTTOM: Thalberg, Shearer and Mayer share a pleasant moment a scant four months before Irving would suffer his fatal heart attack at the age of 36.

# THE BEGINNING & THE END





*"Placed in his proper perspective, he was probably the greatest single force in the development of the motion picture industry to the heights of prosperity and influence it finally attained."*

– Daily Variety

Louis B. Mayer was born Eliezer Mayer in Minsk Russia in 1885, the son of an immigrant junk dealer who moved his family from New York to Halifax before settling in Haverhill Massachusetts in 1904. He was Jewish but only by birth, forever extolling the virtues of God in public and in print while rarely entering the synagogue to confirm that devotion. Mayer was not formally educated but he became master in his profession and a legitimate authority on movie making. It was not an immediate or an easy climb.

Purchasing a small theatre in Haverhill, by 1914 Mayer was president of the largest theater franchise in New England. But his heart and ambitions lay elsewhere. He would later cogitate, *"I realized then that movies are the only thing you can sell and still own."*

In 1917, Mayer launched Louis B. Mayer Productions, entering into a lucrative business arrangement with theatre magnet Marcus Loewe; moving his producer operations to Los Angeles while acquiring Metro Pictures in the process. There, an alliance with Samuel Goldwyn (who had already been successfully producing) resulted in the creation of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios – a company that in a mere ten years became the largest and most profitable film factory on the west coast, in no small part thanks to L.B.'s constant foresight and vision.

(LEFT: In his later years there were really only two loves in Mayer's life; the first was horses, the second, socialite Lorena Danker who eventually became the second Mrs. Mayer. L.B. built one of the finest thoroughbred stud farms on the west coast and spent a good deal of time away from MGM between 1945 and 1947. The euphemism for Mayer's absence was that he was on Lot 28, which meant he was at the race track. In his absence, MGM began to flounder.

Loew's Chairman, Nick Schenck eventually ordered Mayer to find 'a new Thalberg' as VP in Charge of Production - ushering in the brief, but destructive, era of Dore Schary. Schenck also forced Mayer to divest himself of his prized horses - a bitter pill made all the more difficult to swallow when rival moguls William Fox and Jack Warner bought most of the animals for their own racing interests.)









Certainly, MGM's V.P. Irving Thalberg was responsible for the slate of super productions that MGM made during these early years. But Thalberg made these movies with Mayer's unassuming guidance and quiet faith that whatever Thalberg did – especially in the early days of their alliance – was destined to garner the studio both profits and prestige. *"When I came out here in 1939,"* screenwriter Bernard Gordon proclaimed, *"I drove by MGM and thought to myself…by God – that's Hollywood. No other studio compared and Mayer was the boss. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Mayer!"*

At the time of Thalberg's death, Mayer could already lay claim to the most up to date production facilities, most proficient technical staff, an ever-growing roster of top quality star talent and the biggest commissary in Hollywood. With its own fire and police departments and an educational facility for its expanding youth roster, MGM was legally classified as a city – Culver City. The studio's supremacy in the public's mind drew loud applause in theaters even as Leo the Lion roared before each feature.

But MGM's stature was also reflected in films made at other studios. When Warner Bros. or Paramount gambled on their own one or two big movies per annum, these were readily referred to by critics as 'of MGM's quality.' In fact, what other studios spent on two or three movies made up the budget of just one MGM movie; and a B-feature at that. B movies were afforded A-list budgets and A-list movies exemplified the studio's wealth and stature with mind-boggling artistry. Of the top 10 box office draws in the country, at least 5 were under contract to Mayer's dream factory at any one time between 1933 and 1949.

A formidable businessman, Mayer's lack of formal education didn't seem to hurt his prospects. As he ruled MGM with an iron fist though arguably gentle hand, Mayer became the highest paid personage in the industry and President Hoover's very first guest at the White House. Despite his accolades and admiration from without, within the organization of Loewe's Incorporated, Mayer had his detractors. When Marcus Loewe died, Mayer found himself pitted against wily corporate wheeler and dealer – Nicholas Schenck. When Schenk plotted in the late thirties to sell MGM to rival mogul William Fox – a move Mayer successfully thwarted through his political connections – a professional wound opened that would have serious repercussions for Mayer and his studio years later.

TOP: A smug Dore Schary poses for this studio portrait, circa 1953. MIDDLE to BOTTOM: Schary never cared much for MGM's star system. In fact, under his tutelage, the studio began to slowly divest itself of its roster of peerless talent. Mayer, on the other hand, was a star maker. He would spend whatever it took to create a personality if he believed in the creativity of the individual. UPPER MIDDLE: Mayer enjoys a hearty laugh with Lana Turner and Tony Martin. LOWER MIDDLE: Tempers seem strained in this photo of Mayer with Gene Kelly on the set of An American in Paris (1950). BOTTOM: An aged Mayer escorts one time studio diva, Joan Crawford to the premiere of her 'comeback' picture, Torch Song (1953) - an unqualified bomb. A decade earlier, Mayer had allowed Crawford's contract to lapse. The move did them both good. Crawford won her only Oscar for Mildred Pierce (1944) - her first film for Warner Brothers. A decade of prominent hits for Crawford at WB followed.



The rift between Schenck and Mayer, though bitter, was perhaps not quite as apparent immediately after Thalberg's death. After all, there were too many good movies being made at MGM; The Human Comedy, Girl Crazy, A Guy Named Joe, Meet Me In St. Louis, Gaslight, National Velvet, Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo, The White Cliffs of Dover to name but a handful. With profits soaring, Schenck had to concede that Mayer knew what he was doing. *"Mayer had wonderful intuition,"* Esther Williams would later reflect, *"He worked purely from instinct. He didn't read. He couldn't create from scratch. But give him the framework and he could assemble the pieces like his life depended on it…which it did."*

After Thalberg's death, Mayer assumed total control of all MGM productions with what affectionately became known around the back lot as his 'college of cardinals' – a troupe of producers beholding to Mayer and responsible for making his kind of entertainment; light, frothy and lavish. *"MGM functioned like General Motors*, recalled Ricardo Montalban, *"It was run with such efficiency that is was a marvel…it was amazing."*

For a while this formula assembly line worked, particularly since what became known as 'the MGM style' remained a slow, though ever-evolving constant on the screen, overseen behind the camera by Production Designer Cedric Gibbons. Henceforth, MGM's movies were an architectural treat for the eye as much as they were emotionally satisfying for the heart and soul. Mayer's zeal for 'family' films bode well with war time audiences who sought escapism over reality. However after the war, audience tastes changed considerably while Mayer's perception of wholesome entertainment did not.




TOP: There is nothing in this early portrait of Mayer, probably taken around the time he chose to forgo his father's scrap metal business in 1904 and move from Canada, to suggest the greatness in store for the man a decade later. In fact, one might peg Mayer a congenial accountant, even though there is some vague shading of a William Randolph Hearst about his rather plain face.

LEFT: four of MGM's greatest female stars (from top left clockwise) Greta Garbo, Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford and Jean Harlow. MGM stars readily adorned the covers of popular fan magazines. In those days, 'the rag mag' was not yet invented. In its place was a cleverly designed, studio sanctioned PR apparatus that virtually controlled all of the content of stories that went out to the general public about its star talent.

There was little truth to be had herein. In place of reality, the studio's publicity department fabricated fascinating stories about stars as ethereal creatures who never drank to excess, never had bad relationships, never fought with their coworkers and basically led exemplary lives. In short, the image of the star as human perfection on earth was galvanized and showcased to its best advantage. Air brushed and colorized photos such as these helped convince the outside star gazer that life in Hollywood was as near heaven as anything to be found beyond the rainbow. It was all lies, of course; but sold to the public with such panache and flair for the tastefully flamboyant that it almost seemed as though it could happen. Perhaps, you too might be a star.



ABOVE: Three views of 'the general' - Nicholas Schenck, whom L.B. was fond of referring to as 'Mr. Skunk'. Mayer had good reason to be sore at his boss. After Marcus Loew's untimely death, Schenck wasted no time in approaching William Fox about an outright purchase of MGM. Through his own connections in Washington, Mayer thwarted this takeover in 1930 - and thanks to his own overwhelming success at the studio over the next two decades - there was precious little Schenck could do to put Mayer in his place. The personal rift in their working relationship never healed and years later it would result in Mayer finally losing his seat of power after Schenck fired him.

MIDDLE: Schenck and Fox President Darryl F. Zanuck look as though they might be discussing MGM takeover attempt #2 in this rare photo. Despite rumors to the contrary, Schenck never attempted to sell off MGM to the highest bidder ever again. RIGHT: Presenting U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt with a hefty check for The March of Dimes Paralysis Fund in 1944.

Nick Schenck, who had been forced into silence after his failed merger with Fox and during the heady profit-driven days, could be more public now with his distemper toward Mayer. MGM had failed to earn a single Oscar between 1946 and 1948. What had been popular with the masses a few short years earlier was now either only moderately successful or falling shy of expectations. The world of entertainment was evolving. MGM was not. Something had to be done.

In the interim, Mayer had become preoccupied with interests outside of the studio's domain. First on this list of distractions was Mayer's divorce from his first wife, Margaret. By all accounts, L.B.'s sexual appetites were robust. After Margaret's hysterectomy, Mayer confided to close male friends that the thought of making love to his wife was repugnant. Gradually, Mayer's eye began to wander – first to close female friends, then starlets under contract, though as an aging lothario L.B.'s technique in the art of seduction was hardly on par with his prowess as MGM's mogul and chief. A series of light-hearted 'social' affairs often ended badly. Then finally, L.B. became smitten with society matron Lorena Danker. The two were eventually married.

However, Mayer had also found time away from skirt chasing to indulge yet another passion that had absolutely nothing to do with making movies. At any given time of day, L.B. could be found on Lot 13 – a quaint euphemism for Santa Anita Racetrack where he frequently bet on his ever-increasing stable of prized thoroughbreds.

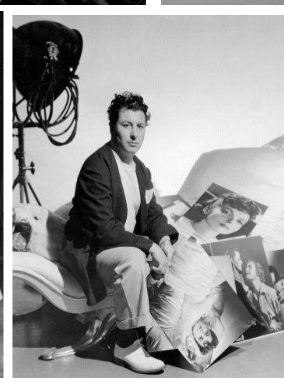
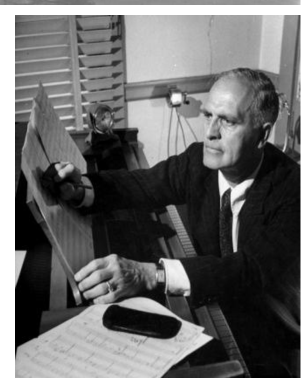
It is likely that if MGM had been taken care of first, Nick Schenck would have continued to look the other way on everything else that Mayer had been investing his time. But with profits at their lowest since the Depression, Schenck seized upon the opportunity to project his own authority over Mayer. Ordered by Schenck to find 'another Thalberg,' Mayer settled on Dore Schary. More Schenck's choice than Mayer's own hand-picked candidate, Dore Schary moved into his Vice Presidency with all the comfortable









TOP: Viewed from the air, MGM in its heyday very much resembled a factory complex more than it did the land of make believe. Yet, what the studio created behind those brick and mortar walls was pure magic. Mayer was fond of promoting his cavalcade of stars as an extended family and literally thousands of publicity photos were taken to secure that image in the public's mind.

MIDDLE ROW, LEFT: Director Rouben Mamoulian discusses a scene with Greta Garbo and John Gilbert from Queen Christina (1934). MIDDLE ROW, MIDDLE: Greer Garson and Teresa Wright share smiles on the set of Mrs. Miniver (1942). Garson's gaze in particular looks wistful. MIDDLE RIGHT: an unidentified extra coddles Leo on a dock near the man-made lake where the Cotton Blossom from Showboat (1951) is moored. Note the oil derricks in the upper right that are NOT part of the set. BOTTOM LEFT: Jeanette MacDonald and Clark Gable on the set of San Francisco (1936) - one of the studio's biggest money makers. BOTTOM MIDDLE: Will the real Dorothy stand up? Three costume tests for Judy Garland in The Wizard of Oz (1939). BOTTOM RIGHT: Two of MGM's most gifted craftsman; stills photographer George Hurrell and composer Herbert Stothart. Hurrell photographed literally every contract player and star from the mid-1930s until 1945; later, establishing his own independent photographic studio. Stothart, was a work horse whose compositions were heard in virtually all of MGM's early to mid-1930s films. His orchestrations for background 'incidental' music for The Wizard of Oz are considered his greatest achievement.







assurances from both Schenck and Mayer that one might expect of a man who had just been handed the keys to the most formidable kingdom in all of Hollywood.

The argument has often been made in Schary's defense that, unlike Mayer, he was a man trying to keep up with the times; meaning he desperately wanted to make more socially conscious films that reflected an awakening away from the glamorous haze that movies in general and MGM movies in particular had provided audiences. To this end, Schary's revamping of the studio's film line up resulted in individual budgets being slashed by 25 percent.

However, Schary, unlike Mayer, had far too many blind spots to effectively run MGM – except perhaps, into the ground. He simply could not see the validity in maintaining a certain status quo that had been – and might have continued to be - MGM's bread and butter. Schary also had little stomach for molly-coddling delinquent stars. Lana Turner's late night carousing and various public scandals were a prime example. To censure Turner without appearing outwardly obvious, Schary instead put the actress in two colossally stupid movies – their back to back flops at the box office suggesting both to Turner and her fans that her days as MGM's reigning sex goddess were rapidly coming to an end.

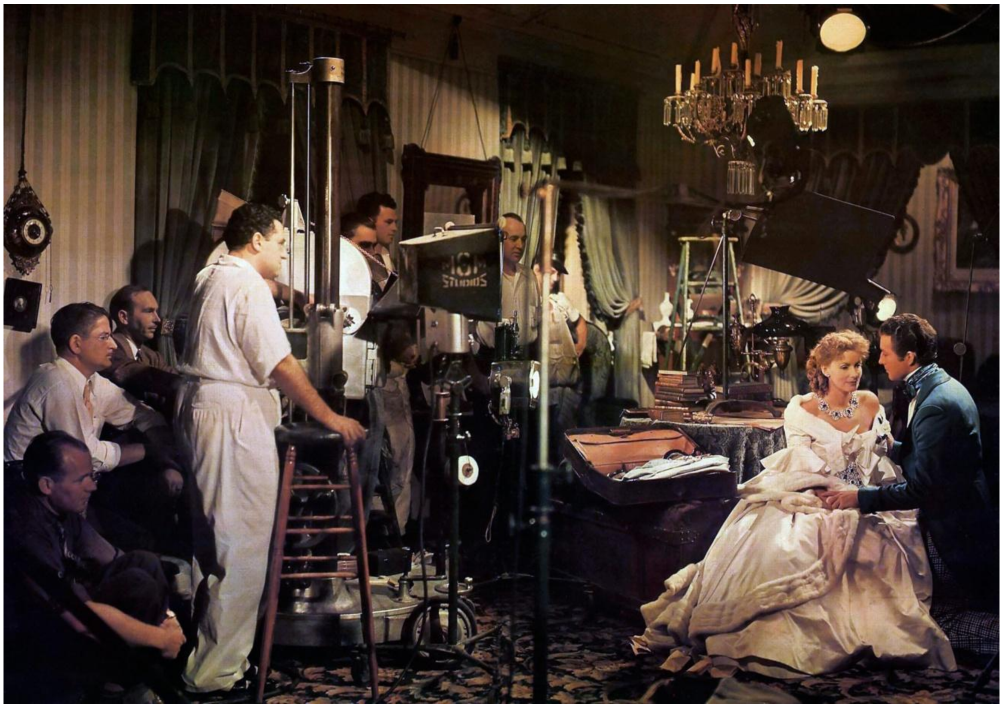
Schary also had no taste for musicals – a genre he did not appreciate or even understand, as is apparent by his suggestion to producer Arthur Freed that the climactic shooting match between Annie (Betty Hutton) and Bill (Howard Keel) be cut from Annie Get Your Gun (1950). The problem herein was that musicals were an MGM main staple – like shredded wheat or ma' and homemade apple pie.

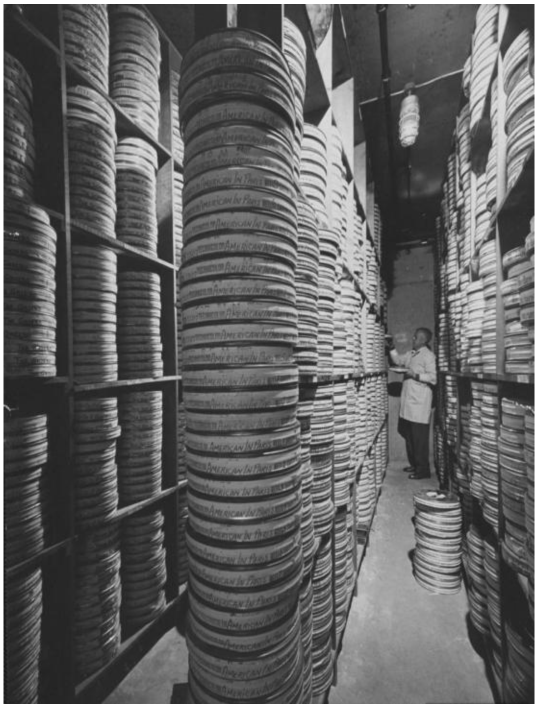
Worse, Schary believed that both MGM's star system and its producer system were top heavy hindrances to the fiscal future of the company. In his tenure at MGM Schary would add only two actors to its roster, James Whitmore and Nancy Davis – both credible actors, neither up to Mayer's vision of the classic 'star.' Responding to Schary's ambition for producing message pictures, producer/director Mervyn LeRoy reportedly told his boss, *"If you want to send a message, go to Western Union!"*

LEFT: More back lot magic. MGM's free standing outdoor sets encompassed every period in history with spectacular detail. In 1976 the entire property was sold off and demolished to make room for condos.

MIDDLE: Joan Crawford coddles her weekly truckload of fan mail circa 1933. Once one of the studio's most bankable stars in the late 1920s and early 30s, by 1939, Crawford's contract was on the chopping block.

BOTTOM: With Thalberg's death, focus shifted to younger talent. In front of the Thalberg Building, Clark Gable smiles with Shirley Temple, Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland. Temple was never a contract player. She belonged to 2oth Century-Fox until Darryl F. Zanuck let her out of her contract to make Kathleen (1941); a modest programmer that did not extend her screen life beyond that of the blonde moppet child star she had once been.





ABOVE: a rare Kodachrome still of MGM hard at work. Behind the camera (left) standing up is director George Cukor with his creative team, that includes cinematographer William Daniels (white shirt/glasses) while to his right Greta Garbo and Robert Taylor emote with tears in a scene from Camille (1936). Begun under Thalberg's guidance, the film was finished after the producer's death, but remained faithful to Thalberg's hallmark of quality.

RIGHT: What's it all for? A technician catalogues another stack of metal film cans in one of MGM's vast and cavernous vaults. Improper storage of vintage titles in poorly ventilated rooms like this one, coupled with poor reproduction technologies that converted flammable nitrate film stocks over to more stable celluloid in the mid-50s has inadvertently led to a whole new industry in Hollywood today - film restoration. Ironically, it wasn't until the mid-1980s that the Library of Congress convinced the federal government to declare film a uniquely American and perishable art form worthy of preservation.

The alliance between Mayer and Schary eventually became so confrontational it resulted in a showdown that ended disastrously for Mayer. Assuming that his tenure through 'lead by example' had provided him with a Teflon coating, Mayer gave Nick Schenk an ultimatum – *"It's either me or Schary!"* The die had been cast. Schenk fired Mayer in 1951 almost without blinking – his belief in Dore Schary as Mayer's successor shaken to its core a scant four years later when Schary's ambitions eventually sank the studio's bottom line deep into the red.

Over the next several years Mayer made several attempts to regain his foothold in the film business – but these ventures – such as his appointment to run the board responsible for Cinerama - were half-hearted at best. By 1957, the strain of struggling to prove he was still worth his metal was too much. Embittered and alone, Mayer resigned himself to ranting in private, than publicly to anyone who would listen on how he had been wronged by Schary and Schenck.

That same year, a lethargic Mayer would check himself into the hospital for a general physical only to learn that he was dying of leukemia. He did not last the year. His last words were to friend and publicist Howard Strickling, *"Nothing matters…nothing matters."*

# REFLECTIONS ON A GREAT MAN



*"Dore Schary could write a script and Dore Schary could make a speech. But Mayer was a showman. He had an uncanny knack for picking talent in executives and actors. He knew how to delegate power, which many executives can't. He was more of a businessman than a creator, but don't you think it takes creativity to build a company like MGM? He couldn't write. He couldn't direct. But he had a greatness."*

- Ralph Winters.

Those who knew L.B. Mayer in his prime have had conflicted recollections of the great man since. Debbie Reynolds has echoed the vast perception shared by many from the old MGM alumni of 'Papa Mayer', a gentle, almost saintly coddler of his stars. *"He would do anything for us,"* former child star Freddie Bartholomew jokingly observed years later, *"except pay us what we were worth."*



Yet, Bartholomew's assessment seems grossly unfair in retrospect and casts a miserly pall on an individual who in truth was far from Ebenezer Scrooge. While it can be argued that Bartholomew's MGM salary pales to what child stars receive today, it was nevertheless a proportionally responsible pay scale for its own time, comparable with what other child stars of his day were being paid at rival studios – save Shirley Temple's gold star treatment at Fox (and rightfully so, since Shirley alone was responsible for pulling 20$^{th}$ Century-Fox out of receivership).

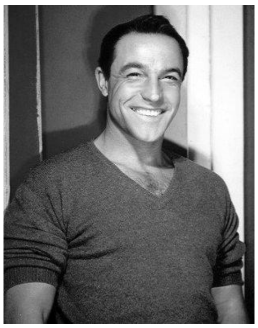
TOP LEFT: Mayer in a studio photo taken in 1945, just as his seemingly imperishable empire was about to begin to crumble. Changing public tastes, the end of WWII and the onslaught of television did much to cripple MGM's supremacy in the marketplace. Mayer refused to believe in TV as a viable alternative to the movies and as such possibly doomed MGM to a decade of financial entrenchment in the 1950s.

BOTTOM LEFT: Greeting a nervous Irene Dunne at the post premiere gala for 1944's The White Cliffs of Dover. The film, a magnificent melodrama told with epic production values, marked MGM's 20th anniversary as an industry leader.




Furthermore, Mayer was ever the philanthropist throughout his life's work. Whatever his personal failings, he always found time to invest in projects that could in no way advance his reputation as a film maker.

He frequently invested in entrepreneurial projects put forth by other people and gave freely of both his funds and time in doing good by both the young and old. Perhaps it was all merely a façade; just another way to present himself to the world as a great man. Those who knew him best, however, doubt such planned cleverness. *"I found him*




*wonderful,"* recalled Howard Keel, the star of such MGM classics as Showboat and Kiss Me Kate, *"Doing benefits for charities and old people. When I reached out to shake his hand and thank him for the opportunity he had given me he pulled back a moment and pointed his finger at me, saying 'Don't thank me. Thank your mother.'"*

Gene Kelly's glib response to an interview in 1990, *"I didn't like him, he didn't like me…it was mutual" also* seems more than a tad unfair in




assessing Mayer's general respect for talent – given Kelly's repeated penchant for defying studio edicts by doing his own stunt work. If, as Kelly has suggested, Mayer never cared for him particularly, then Mayer could so easily have black-balled the fledgling star, not only from MGM but Hollywood in general. With Mayer's overriding integrity and power it would have been so easily accomplishable. The fact that he did not fire Kelly during the mid-forties, long before Kelly proved his own saleable commodity at the box office with mega-hits like **On The Town**, **An American in Paris** and **Singin' In The Rain**, attests to a more patient and forgiving nature than Kelly has ever given Mayer credit for.



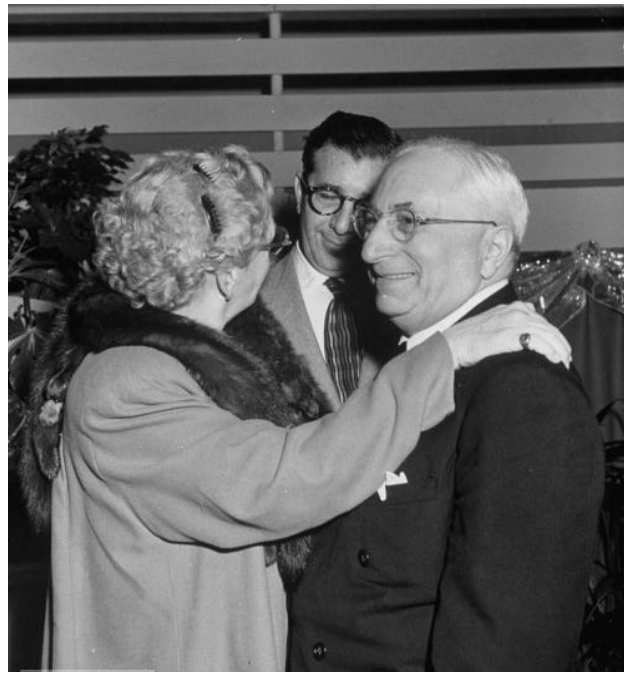
In recent years, Mayer's own words have come back to haunt his reputation. Upon leaving the funeral services for Irving Thalberg, Mayer is reported to have nudged Eddie Mannix and muttered, *"Isn't God good to me?"*; a murderous statement by any standard. Yet, given the climate of tension, conflict and perceived animosity between him and his Vice President at the time of Thalberg's death, one can almost sympathize with Mayer's sense of relief. A thorn had been removed from his side.



LEFT: L.B. had his detractors as well as his friends. Howard Keel (top left) appreciated Mayer for his charitable works and his personal guidance of his early career. Freddie Bartholomew (top right) reflects that Mayer manipulated his child stars, occasionally to their own detriment. (Middle left) Gene Kelly's dislike of Mayer seems to stem largely from creative differences - particularly that Mayer did not want Kelly to do his own stunt work which Kelly frequently did anyway and in defiance of Mayer.

(Middle right) Esther Williams thought Mayer a ham, but she certainly appreciated his talent as a film maker. (Lower middle left) Mayer coddles a pint sized Margaret O'Brien on the set of Meet Me In St. Louis (1944). (Lower middle right) Mayer attempts to hand Louise Rainer her Academy Award for The Great Ziegfeld (1936) as Spencer Tracy's wife looks on. (Left) Mayer with Jimmy Durante at a party circa 1949. Durante adored Mayer and vice versa. (Bottom) Mayer in 1926, already showing signs of being a stern administrator.





TOP LEFT: Mayer would host weekend parties at his fashionable Malibu home for his child stars. While there is little doubt that scenes like this one were expressly staged for the cameras, it is nevertheless true that Mayer did much to promote himself as a father figure to his roster of young talent. TOP RIGHT: an ardent, unidentified admirer embraces Mayer as Dore Schary looks on. While Mayer seems elated by the affection being shown, Schary's look is more contempt than contentment.

The more recent rumor, that L.B. Mayer somehow managed to hasten Thalberg's demise by generating more stress in Irving's professional life, also seems rather misguided. If anything, following Thalberg's first heart attack in 1933, Mayer tried to alleviate is stresses by giving Irving his own production unit while creating smaller units not under his authority, thereby lightening Irving's load of responsibilities by with more time for convalescence. That Thalberg was impassioned about his job, an obsession that drove every fiber of his being past the point of no return is well documented. As First Lady of the American Theater, Helen Hayes would reflect on Thalberg running the studio, *"It killed him. He died of genius"* – not Mayer! If Mayer did nothing else to temper this dynamo, he also did not add to Thalberg's uncontrollable zest for his work, work and more work long after the twenty-four hours in each day had already been thoroughly spent.

After Mayer's dismissal MGM was never quite the same again. The consistency that Mayer had provided – the idyllic circumstances for a fertile proving ground where creative talents could function at their zenith was gone. Schary's tenure at the studio was brief, rather than galvanic, and disastrous to say the least, and, it was followed by an ever-changing cavalcade of appointments that barely had enough time to place their personal seal on any film before being ousted in favor of another major executive upheaval. *"I think when (Mayer) died he took the studio with him,"* reflected June Allyson – Metro's most popular musical sweetheart, *"...so he didn't really lose in the end."*

There is little to deny that many of the films produced after Mayer's departure lost some of their showmanship and ability to recapture the imagination that exemplified the best of the studio's product under L.B. While the lion's share infrequently managed a bit of the old luster that lived up to the studio's motto of 'ars gratia artis' – loosely translated into 'art for art's sake' with mega-hits like North By Northwest (1959)

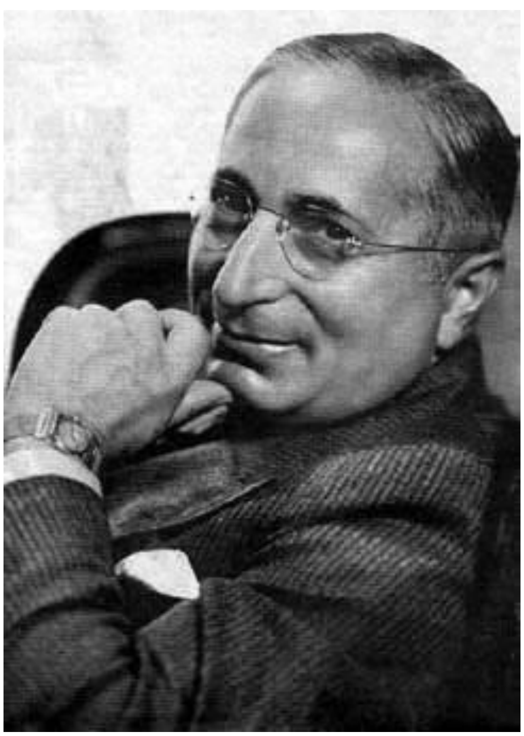


Ben-Hur (1959) Gigi (1958) and Doctor Zhivago (1965) for the most part, a genuine and overriding sense of finality to the good ol' days had crept onto the back lot.

Indeed, by 1959 the studio system that Mayer had worked so diligently to cultivate and preserve was, sadly, a thing of the past. If Mayer had succeeded in making his comeback to Culver City he would have discovered a very different studio awaiting his command. Instead, and perhaps with the underlying knowledge that the times had made his sort of autocratic diplomacy as much of a relic as the Weimar Republic, Mayer chose an imposed isolationism for his final years. Though few who had trailed on his coattails visited him in the twilight of his life, if nothing else, L.B. Mayer could reflect with pride that his had been the most prosperous tenure of any mogul at any of the film studios in Hollywood.



The old edict once applied to Thalberg – *"as long as Irving lives we are all great men"* – could just as easily be ascribed (and should have been) to L.B. Mayer. Esther Williams has quipped, that Mayer's number one compensation for his lack of culture and education was 'intimidation'. To some extent this is true, as in the time Mayer became so displeased with resident operatic diva Jeanette MacDonald's singing that he dropped to his knees to belt out a Jewish hymn with tears in his eyes to illustrate for MacDonald how she should carry a tune. Yet, those who found Mayer temperamental were themselves temperamental artists of considerable merit. Hence, Mayer



may have bruised their vanity, though little else. If he exuded God-like control over his stars and starlets he was in keeping with the general mentality of his contemporaries (Jack Warner, Darryl F. Zanuck, et al) in exercising rights of ownership in order to ensure that every artist at his studio came off like a gentleman or lady.

Perhaps former child star and frequent L.B. favorite Mickey Rooney best summed up the confusion surrounding Mayer's legacy with, *"After he died everybody wrote every nasty book about him, while he was alive he was the greatest guy in the world to everybody…I mean everybody."*

-NZ

TOP LEFT: Mayer prepares to give testimony during the HUAC committee hearings in Washington. A devote conservative, Mayer's pontification at the hearings left little doubt that he was an American patriot through and through.

MIDDLE: Mayer and Thalberg (with an unidentified man) at the start of their Hollywood careers - circa 1925. From this vantage the two could never image what meteoric heights they would scale together. BOTTOM: Mayer looking relaxed and rested, circa 1939. He had reasons to be. MGM was then the most profitable studio in the world, outranking the competition by a profit margin of three to one. Thalberg was gone and Mayer was now in complete control of his movie making empire. He was, as Time Magazine had dubbed him, 'Hollywood's Raja'.